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AUTHOR Fulmer, Hal W.
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ABSTRACT

The pregraduation internship is a vital link between public relations classes and the public relations professions. Practitioners consistently regard the internship as the most crucial aspect of a public relations degree program. Interns should be of junior or senior standing, have completed some, if not most, of their public relations course work, and have spent at least a year in their major. Prospective interns should have completed a substantial part of two related areas of study prior to the internship: fundamental courses; and support courses which integrate necessary additional material into the general knowledge of the public relations student. The success of an internship program is directly proportional to the amount of control exercised by the institution. Public relations faculty at a mid-sized public university in the southeastern United States attempt to match prospective interns with opportunities at over 50 active public relations sites. General site contracts and intern contracts are drawn up. Amount of payment and course credit varies and remains controversial. Faculty at the university keep in close touch with the interns. Although properly administered internships require a serious commitment of time, energy, and resources by faculty who are interested, the value of public relations internships cannot be overemphasized. Increasingly, it is the major factor in entry-level employment. (Contains 15 references.) (RS)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS INTERNSHIPS:

BRIDGING THE CLASSROOM-BOARDROOM GAP

Dr. Hal W. Fulmer
Department of Communication Arts
Landrum Box 8121
Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, Georgia 30460
912/681-0805

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Hal Fulmer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

The strength of any undergraduate communication program resides in its application (Hanson; Hyre and Owens). Communication courses find their logical end in a student's ability to translate course concepts into settings beyond the classroom. Almost two decades ago, this journal began its discussion of internships and their place in communication programs (Huseman; Sanborn; Alexander; Porterfield; and Downs). Among the communication curricula, public relations sequences are perhaps most sensitive to this relationship between ideas and application. Theories of public relations would be virtually useless without an ability to practice this art of the communication between source and publics.

This essay explores the pre-graduation internship as a vital link between public relations classes and the public relations profession. Support for this paper is found in an existing public relations internship program at a mid-sized university in the Southeast. The internship program at this university has been in place for twenty years, and has been completed by hundreds of students in that time. Further support is found in the quarterly discussions held between the author and leading public relations practitioners throughout the Southeast. Additional research on this subject in trade and academic journals is cited as well.

Following a brief introduction, this paper discusses three major areas: **1) the academic preparation for the internship, 2) the academic structure for the internship, and 3) the administrative procedures involved in the internship process.**

The Value of the Internship: An Introduction

Without a doubt, practitioners consistently regard the internship as the most crucial part of a public relations degree program. "I can't imagine hiring an entry-level person who hasn't had an internship," Neva Rountree, president of the Atlanta-based Rountree Group public relations firm, claimed (Anthony). As Randy Siegel, general manager of Fleishman-Hillard's office in Atlanta noted, "Unless kids have an internship, they don't have a prayer. Schools have caught on and the smart ones require internships to graduate" (Anthony).

Many organizations have been forced to scale back their work force, resulting in fewer top-level, higher paying positions. What openings are available tend to be entry-level ones with the corresponding lower salaries. Competition to gain one of these entry positions can be fierce; often, the deciding factor in securing employment is experiential learning. The internship is a major source of such experience. The *Public Relations Journal* noted in a recent issue, "Hands-on experience is the single most important benefit of an internship" (Redeker, 20). Colleen McDonough, executive director of the Public Relations Student Society of America, was even more direct: "It's getting to the point where students without internship experience are at a distinct disadvantage. Employers look to see which job candidates have had internships, where they worked, and what they did" (Redeker, 20).

The value of a public relations internship is obvious. A recent survey of public relations practitioners revealed the

following top-rated activities essential for a public relations student's success (Redeker, 21):

Writing skills	Work experience
Problem-solving skills	Media relations techniques
Speaking skills	People management skills.

All of these necessary skills typically are enhanced and developed during a public relations internship, further increasing the likelihood of meaningful employment after graduation.

In brief, the internship is a vital and necessary part of the public relations degree program, offering valuable hands-on experience for the aspiring practitioner (Cowdin, 13-16; Pedro, 80-95). The following sections discuss key issues related to implementing and maintaining a successful public relations internship program.

Academic Preparation

The timing for an internship is important (Konsky). A student without some basic classroom knowledge of public relations is not likely to receive the fullest benefits from his or her internship. On the other hand, it is hardly necessary to require students to wait until they have finished all course work before venturing out into the internship. A case can be made for the student who pursues course work to a point, completes an internship, and then returns to the classroom. One obvious advantage is the student will likely have a better understanding of course material after having had an opportunity to practice the concepts during the internship. A second advantage is less obvious but equally compelling. The returning student serves as an important opinion leader among his or her peers on the validity of course work and the significance of an internship.

Many institutions now recommend more than one pre-graduation internship. Typically, a student might intern at the beginning of the junior year, followed by an internship at the end of the senior year.

What academic preparation is necessary for a successful internship? The answer may vary from student to student, but several basic parameters apply. First, the intern should be of junior or senior standing. Interns represent their institutions as well as their departments while on site, and maturity is important for a successful internship. While age is never the sole determinant for maturity, a junior or senior should be more capable of coping with the responsibilities of an internship than his or her freshman counterpart.

A student should have completed some, if not most, of his/her public relations course work, and specifically, those courses in public relations required for the degree. At the very minimum, a student should have completed successfully an introductory course and some secondary work in public relations. Without this background, the intern will lack the classroom work

to fully appreciate and apply the internship experience. Additionally, a student should have completed a significant amount of the support courses for the public relations degree. These courses provide the student with necessary tools for the internship and serve as important preparation for the daily practice of public relations. These courses are more fully discussed in a separate section below.

Finally, a prospective intern should have spent at least a year in his or her major. This allows professors within the program an opportunity to judge the potential of the intern and help guide the site selection process. Academic weaknesses can be recognized and remedied within this time frame. This year also prevents an unknown student from representing the department and institution without some input from the perspective of the public relations curriculum.

Academic Structure

The prospective intern should have completed a substantial part of two related areas of study prior to the internship. This completion is essential if the student is only completing one internship in the senior year. If the student pursues an earlier internship (the junior year), then some allowance for these course requirements is anticipated.

Initially, a student should have completed upper-division courses related specifically to the study of public relations. These are **foundational** classes for internship preparation. Typically, these include an introductory course as well as a senior-level capstone course (often centered around campaign strategies and case studies). Any additional course work in public relations will only enhance the student's internship experience. Other courses, such as public relations research methods and communication programming for public relations, can be applied by almost every intern. Other, content-specific courses (corporate public relations, agency public relations, international public relations, etc.) are useful to the student who interns at one of these types of sites.

Courses in public relations independent studies and practica also offer the opportunity to apply classroom experiences in real-world settings. These are important harbingers of the internship activities to come.

A second area of study concerns support courses, which **integrate** necessary additional material into the general knowledge of the public relations student. Chief among these are classes in journalism. Especially important here is for the student to get as much classroom experience in writing as possible. Key classes would include news writing, feature writing, editorial writing, and broadcast script writing. Other important course work is in graphic arts and especially layout and design. Students without this knowledge are at a marked disadvantage in the work place. Most internship locations now complete their graphics material on-site.

Related to graphic arts is computer knowledge. In addition

to basic word processing abilities, the student should possess a working knowledge of computer-generated graphics. Students should also take courses in broadcasting. As the table in the Introduction suggests, media relations are an important part of the internship. Included in this broadcasting sequence should be production classes as well as ones focusing on mass communication theory.

Finally, students should take courses in communication principles and theories. These kinds of classes might include public speaking, listening, nonverbal communication, small group communication, and interpersonal communication. A more complete listing of recommended courses in these two areas of study is listed below:

Foundational Courses

Organizational Communication	Public Opinion and Research
Introduction to Public Relations	Public Relations Cases
International Public Relations	Public Relations Campaigns
Public Relations Communication	Public Relations Practicum
Selected Topics/Public Relations	Methods of Social Research

Integrative Courses

Industrial Psychology	Application of Microcomputers
Desktop Publishing	Graphic Arts Technology
News Reporting and Writing	Feature Writing
Mass Media Research	Principles of Marketing
Principles of Advertising	Theories of Management
Communication Theory	Rhetorical Theory
Rhetorical Criticism	Theories of Persuasion
Nonverbal Communication	Theories of Mass Communication
Interpersonal Communication	Public Speaking
Small Group Communication	Political Communication
Principles of Speech-Writing	Social Psychology
Cultural Anthropology	Intellectual/Social History
Economic Theory	Principles of Accounting

Academic Procedures

The success of an internship program is directly proportional to the amount of control exercised by the institution (Pace; Hellweg). Areas of control include strong faculty involvement in the selection process of matching prospective intern with a suitable site. Many institutions allow students to secure their own internships, but such a practice limits the control of the department, and especially the program's faculty. The coordinating function of the faculty member is laborious and time-consuming, but preferred. At the university which serves as a case study for this essay, prospective public relations interns apply for an internship with the public relations faculty approximately one year in advance. The student fills out a standard application, listing preferred internship sites, and attaches a resume.

The public relations program at the case university maintains a list of over fifty active public relations sites for

the students to use in indicating choice. These sites cover all types of public relations work, including corporations, health care facilities, agencies, nonprofit organizations, and travel/tourism industries. These sites are evaluated annually and new sites are opened only as needed, from a secondary "waiting list" of organizations which have contacted the public relations faculty about securing interns.

Upon receiving these applications, the public relations faculty attempt to match each student with an appropriate site. Consideration is given to such variables as: the student's preferences, the student's housing obligations (long-terms leases and hometowns), the student's class work, and the student's involvement in public relations activities.

Another important procedure involves the repeated use of internship sites. This repetition enhances the communication between the site supervisor and the internship coordinator. Expectations of the student intern are more easily understood and in some instances, there is a competition from one intern to another at the same site. Institutional memory for the internship site is also enhanced.

Other procedural issues concern the contractual nature of the internship (Abelman). General site contracts and intern contracts are valuable for several reasons: 1) these contracts protect the student, the site, and the institution; 2) these contracts specify the expectations of each of these parties; and 3) these contracts strongly suggest the serious nature of the internship for all parties involved, especially the students.

Another issue concerns payment for the intern. Payment will vary by site, from a full entry-level staff salary to no payment at all. Most sites will reimburse a student for work-related travel expenses. This issue remains a controversial one. A good rule of thumb is the inverse relationship between the number of hours received by the intern and the need for payment (Parkison, 3).

Monitoring the intern's progress is another key issue. The best results are also the most time-consuming. At the case university for this essay, the public relations faculty remain in close touch with the interns throughout the academic quarter and personally visit each site toward the end of the quarter. This site visit involves the intern and the site supervisor and is used to determine the intern's final grade in the internship. The site supervisor suggests a level of achievement secured by the intern, but the faculty member is ultimately responsible for the grading of the intern. Also considered in this determination of final grade are the student's portfolio of work and a final paper.

Finally, there is the issue of academic credit for the internship. Many internships are part-time and the student receives a minimal amount of course credit. In the case program of this essay, the public relations internship is full-time and students are expected to work approximately 40 hours per week for the quarter. For this work, they receive 15 hours of credit (one

academic quarter's credit). Additionally, the students may be paid. They also receive the obvious benefits of portfolio-building, job experience, and networking.

Conclusion

The value of the public relations internship cannot be overemphasized. Increasingly, it is the major factor in entry-level employment. In many cases, the student intern is hired by the internship site or through contacts made during the internship.

A final word of caution: properly administrated internships require a serious commitment of time, energy, and resources by the faculty who are involved. These commitments require equally serious support by the institution. Properly done, the internship is a rewarding experience for the student, the faculty member, the institution, and the site.

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